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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Notes from the Northwest

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Hayitbay Yakirboy, a human rights activist from Khorezm, met with poloff on August 12, 2009 to discuss issues facing northwestern Uzbekistan. Yakirboy addressed labor trafficking problems and discontent in the semiautonomous region of Karakalpakstan and the northwest province of Khorezm, as well as the situation of ethnic Uzbeks living in Turkmenistan. End summary.

No Work in the Wasteland

¶2. (SBU) Yakirboy described the semiautonomous region of Karakalpakstan as a "wasteland," noting that although Nukus, the capital city of the "Republic," is still a functioning urban center, the rural areas are without infrastructure, economic opportunity, or medical treatment facilities, and that rural populations have no access to clean drinking water. He reported that up to 30 percent of working age people leave for migrant work in Kazakhstan, Russia, and even Mongolia. He explained that Kazakhstan and Mongolia are drawing an increasing number of people because those governments are more favorable to foreign workers. Specifically, Kazakhstan has a repatriation program for ethnic Karakalpaks, who have close ethnic ties with ethnic Kazakhs. This program gives certain benefits to Uzbeks who relocate permanently to Kazakhstan, so many who leave are not coming back. Mongolia apparently is receptive to foreign workers, as well, although the job opportunities there are not as plentiful as in Kazakhstan. In Russia, both labor and social conditions are getting worse for Central Asians, so while people still do head to Russia in large numbers, many are looking elsewhere for better opportunities.

¶3. (SBU) Yakirboy described conditions in Khorezm province, also in northwestern Uzbekistan, detailing a recent labor trafficking case where five young males were promised good jobs in Kazakhstan, but had their passports taken from them as soon as they arrived. The men, the youngest of whom was 17 years old, worked without pay and tried to get their passports back, unable to get word to their families of their situation. Four of the five were able to return to Horazm about a year later without their passports, but the fifth is reportedly still missing somewhere in Kazakhstan. Yakirboy stated that in the last nine months, he has documented more than 160 cases of Uzbek workers in Russia and Mongolia who say they are working without getting paid.

Growing Discontent

14. (SBU) Yakirboy stated that local and regional governments do little to address labor trafficking problems in the region, noting that the Government of Uzbekistan does not consider labor migrants in its anti-trafficking programs. He described how Uzbek border officials harass exiting migrants, exacting a toll for crossing the border and threatening to accuse migrants of being under the influence of drugs if they don't pay, which can result in a three-day medical confinement. Officials do little to assist families who try to track down sons and daughters who fall out of contact after leaving the country, and nothing to improve the local domestic economy, which at least theoretically could provide an alternative to working abroad.

15. (SBU) Yakirboy asserted that discontent is growing over a variety of issues, not just trafficking. He said that local officials have been known to hold back pensions and other social payments until certain "fees" are paid, and are unresponsive to residents' complaints. Those people who try to use the courts to

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resolve civil financial matters have to wait years for any resolution, and between actual fees, bribes, and lengthy delays, rarely achieve what they believe to be justice.

16. (SBU) While there used to be an independence movement in Karakalpakstan, Yakirboy stated that there is little left of it. But while independence may no longer be a rallying cry, Yakirboy stated ominously that discontent is quietly building, as people feel ever less able to improve their daily lives.

17. (SBU) Comment: While little is reported on discontent in the northwest, it's not surprising in light of the ecological and socio-economic situation there. With so much of the population leaving the country either temporarily or on a permanent basis, though, it seems doubtful that any real social upheaval will originate from either Karakalpakstan or Khorezm. Andijon, in Eastern Uzbekistan, with its growing population and history of ethnic and religious conflict, remains the most-likely center of public unrest in Uzbekistan. End comment.

Ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan

18. (SBU) Yakirboy has family in nearby Turkmenistan, and closely follows the situation of ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan. He gave a short history of the problem, stating that after independence, some ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan could obtain neither Uzbek nor Turkmen citizenship, and kept their red Soviet passports as travel documents. Then, under Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi), ethnic Uzbeks were allowed to get passports from Turkmenistan, but had to list their ethnicity as Turkmen. Yakirboy described a time of Uzbek "cultural ethnic cleaning," where theaters, museums, education materials, and cultural groups were all wiped clean of any reference to an Uzbek population or past. He states that even high level ministers with Uzbek ancestry were dismissed from their positions.

19. (SBU) Today, ethnic Uzbeks have the same legal rights to social programs and protections as ethnic Turkmen, at least on paper. In practice, Yakirboy states, several hurdles stand in the way. For example, while there is no barrier to attending higher education

facilities, no educational instruction is given in the Uzbek language. According to Yakirboy's research, between 1997 and 2008, only 5 ethnic Uzbeks have received university diplomas. Finally, Yakirboy states that Turkmen data greatly underestimates the ethnic Uzbek population, with 2008 figures showing that only 120,000 ethnic Uzbeks live in Turkmenistan, whereas Yakirboy states that according to his figures, 169,000 Uzbeks live in one region alone.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Little information on the problem of ethnic Uzbeks in Turkmenistan exists in Uzbekistan. Although Yakirboy gets much of his information through friends and relatives in Turkmenistan, he has also partnered with a Russian human rights monitoring group that looks at this issue, and has been involved in some training of Turkmen rights activists. His work seems well documented, and he belongs to one of the most professional coalitions of human rights workers (Rapid Response Group) in Uzbekistan. While his numbers may not be 100 percent accurate (as few are in Central Asia), his conclusion - that ethnic Uzbeks still face significant de facto barriers to full equality in Turkmenistan - bears further scrutiny. End comment.

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